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ABSTRACT

Student journal writing can connect reading, writing, and discussing through activities that accommodate diverse learning styles and that further students' linguistic development. The various uses of journal writing can be incorporated into one compact student notebook. A notebook for an English class might consist of a dialogue journal as a preface, a literary journal as the body of the notebook, and a subject journal as the glossary. By keeping a dialogue journal, a "conversation in print" with the teacher, students develop during a semester from self-expressive writers to expressively communicative writers. By keeping a literary journal (a written record of personal responses to passages from literature) students read actively, responding throughout their reading. A subject journal, a record of written responses to expository texts, could serve as the glossary of the student notebook by including: (1) responses to background readings such as biographies, histories, and genre students; (2) a personalized dictionary of literary and linguistic terms for investigation; and (3) a personalized stylebook of rhetorical, grammatical, and mechanical concerns. (RS)

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Effective Use of Student Journal Writing

by Gary R. Cobine

The concept of a "communications triangle" of reading, writing, and discussing implies the need for a methodology whereby the teacher could stimulate the natural interaction of language uses in students to further linguistic development. Specifically, it implies the need for a method with which the teacher could connect reading and writing assignments to teach "the art of communicating" (Simpson, 1986).

As the cornerstone of such a communications method, student journals have proven simple, yet effective (see Bromley, 1993). For example, one secondary school teacher uses the following method: The teacher starts with an oral reading of a passage from literature, follows it up with journal writing about the passage, and ends with voluntary sharing of journal entries by students. Notably, during the journal writing, the teacher, as well as the students, writes about the passage. Then, both to model a critical response and to set the students at ease about sharing their own responses, the teacher shares his/her journal entry first. As a result of this technique, the students practice listening and speaking—reciprocating in group discussion, and reading and writing critically—recognizing and evaluating their opinions and beliefs (Simpson, 1986).

Similarly, a college instructor has devised the following communications method: The teacher initiates a 15-minute focused freewrite for a pre-discussion journal entry about the day's reading. Afterwards, the teacher breaks the class into small groups, appoints a group leader, and assigns a focus topic, question, or task for discussion of the day's reading. Next, the small groups reconvene for a class discussion in which the students share the minutes of their discussions. Finally, during the last 15 minutes of class, the students do a second focused freewrite for a post-discussion journal entry about the reading, broadening their initial responses. Because the course reading is supported with journal writing, which, in turn, is supported with discussion, the students "merge various [communication] skills," writing about ideas found in reading, and speaking about ideas found in writing (Mink, 1988).

Coordination of Journal Uses

Although there are several particular purposes and, therefore, uses for journal writing, these uses could be incorporated in one compact student notebook (Jones, 1990). An English-class notebook, for example, could be modeled after a book; it could be divided into a preface, a body of chapters, and a glossary. A "dialogue journal," whose primary purpose is to foster communicativeness in students, could serve as the preface. A "literary journal," whose primary purpose is to foster thoughtfulness in students, could serve as the body-of-chapters. A "content area journal," or subject journal, whose primary purpose is to help students identify and clarify troublesome terms and concepts, could serve as the glossary.

Dialogue Journals

By keeping a dialogue journal, a "conversation in print" with the teacher, students develop during a semester from self-expressive writers to expressively communicative writers. Dialogue-journal writing bridges the gap between diary writing and report writing. Like diary writing, it is personal, informal, direct, and succinct. Yet, at the same time, by using a dialogue journal, students automatically apprentice themselves to the teacher, a mature writer—that is, not only do students write about topics of personal concern, but they also observe a mature writer's response to these same topics and sometimes imitate this mature writer's methods (Staton, 1987). For example, when the teacher makes a comparison to support his/her comment, students might later try the method themselves. In adopting methods such as comparison, analogy, description, and argumentation, then, students come to write more communicatively and, gradually, more formally.

With dialogue journal-as-preface, students could write brief notes about their state-of-the-class perspectives. They could question and comment, as well as answer questions and comments that the teacher has written alongside their entries. For instance, if a student notes a barrier to his/her academic progress, the teacher might write a suggestion about an alternative study habit alongside the student's entry. Or, if numerous students share the same perception about a barrier, the teacher might propose a change in classroom protocol. Then the student might write in response to the teacher's proposal or even write a counter-proposal. Alongside the student's latest entry, the teacher could again write a comment or question. Since the purpose of a dialogue journal is to provide students with a real audience and thereby enhance their rhetorical awareness, the teacher would respond only to the content of the student's entry, not to grammatical and mechanical errors in the writing; instead, the teacher would lead by example, modeling grammatical and mechanical correctness in his/her own written responses (Burniske, 1994).

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Literary Journals

By keeping a literary journal (a written record of personal responses to passages from literature) students read actively, responding throughout their reading, not just at the end, and responding immediately and fully. For instance, after an oral reading of a passage, students choose one literary topic among several topics suggested by the teacher and then write about it for 10 or 15 minutes, giving a full, personal response. They could write predictions about plot, analyses of characters, insights about theme, or even appraisals of the author's technique (Simpson, 1986). Moreover, when the plot, characters, or theme are suggestive of real-life experiences or subjects of personal expertise, they could make personal references in their responses. Similarly, after a class discussion of the passage, the students could write again, either elaborating their first response or responding directly to something said in the discussion (Mink, 1988).

The literary journal could serve as the body-of-chapters for an English-class notebook, the cumulative entries for every piece of literature comprising one "chapter." Since the purpose of a literary journal is to elicit topics of personal interest and thereby provoke thought about the literary dimension in reading, the teacher would again refrain from marking grammatical and mechanical errors; instead, the teacher would write comments and questions alongside the entries to underscore a literary connection made by a student or to imply a connection missed by the student. Later, the teacher could assign a formal paper for which the students would have to elaborate and refine an entry, or else combine and synthesize several entries. Only in response to the formal paper would the teacher point out significant grammatical and mechanical errors.

Subject Journal

A subject journal, a record of written responses to expository texts, could serve as the glossary of a student notebook. For an English-class notebook, there are several possible uses for the subject journal-as-glossary. In Section A, students could write responses to background readings such as biographies, histories, and genre studies, just as they write responses to passages from literature in the literary journal. In Section B, they could make a personalized dictionary of literary and linguistic terms for investigation. In Section C, they could make a personalized stylebook of rhetorical, grammatical, and mechanical concerns, regarding their formal papers.

By keeping Section A, responses to background readings, students read actively, searching for the main ideas suggested in expository texts and evaluating the ideas. For example, after writing an entry in the literary journal about a chapter from a novel such as "Animal Farm," the students could write parallel entries in the subject journal in response to a biographical portrait of George Orwell, a historical article on the rise of communism in Russia, and an article on the fable as a literary genre. Or, in conjunction with Orwell's "1984," they could write parallel entries in response to a historical article on World War I and an article on the utopia/dystopia genre. Alongside an entry, the teacher would write open-ended questions suggestive of ideas and evidence in the expository text, thereby directing a student's attention back to the textual ideas and evidence that either confirm or contradict the student's assertions about the text.

By keeping Section B, a personalized dictionary of important terms, students clarify troublesome concepts. For an English-class notebook, they could define literary terms such as mood, motif, or point-of-view, and linguistic terms such as phrase, clause, or predicate. Alongside the definitions, the teacher could indicate the degree of accuracy with a plus, check, or minus sign. Moreover, the teacher could note for himself/herself the trends in student comprehension and then review the most troublesome concepts in upcoming classes.

By keeping Section C, a personalized stylebook, students track their progress with language usage throughout the course. Based upon the teacher's selective evaluation and response to their formal papers, the students could identify three priority concerns at every level of linguistic concerns. In this personalized stylebook, they could write succinct statements—as reminders to themselves—about every concern. They could then follow every personal reminder with several examples from their own writing. In this way, their stylebook would be a simplified, personalized version of "Elements of Style," in which cogent imperatives about "rules of usage" and "principles of composition" are listed and followed with examples.

There are, then, numerous possible uses for journal writing. In this Digest, explanations and illustrations have been proffered for several complementary uses in a single Student Notebook: a dialogue journal for engendering communicativeness, a literary journal for stimulating thought, and a subject journal both for augmenting work in a specific subject and for troubleshooting subject-specific concerns. These complementary purposes are subsumed by the overall educational objective: to connect reading, writing, and discussing through activities that accommodate diverse learning styles and that further students' linguistic development—that lay the groundwork of a communications pyramid to be raised throughout the students' adult lives.

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